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The problem of political despair

Dislodging Trump has bought American democracy only a brief reprieve. The Democratic Party now has to fight a growing sense of hopelessness

On Friday morning, after a night of insomnia fuelled by worries about raising children in a collapsing society, I opened my eyes, started reading about efforts by Wisconsin Republicans to seize control of the state's elections, then paused to let my tachycardiac heartbeat subside. Marinating in the news is part of my job, but doing so lately is a source of full-body horror. If this were simply my problem, I'd write about it in a journal instead of in *The New York Times*. But political despair is an issue for the entire Democratic Party.

It's predictable that, with Donald Trump out of the White House, Democrats would pull back from constant, frenetic political engagement. But there's a withdrawal happening right now — from news consumption, activism and, in some places, voting — that seems less a product of relief than of avoidance. Part of this is simply burnout and lingering trauma from Covid-19. But I suspect that part of it is about growing hopelessness born of a sense that dislodging Trump has bought American democracy only a brief reprieve.

One redeeming feature of Trump's presidency, in retrospect, was that it was possible to look forward to the date when Americans could finish it. Covid-19, too, once seemed like something we'd be able to largely put behind us when we got vaccinated. Sure, Trumpism, like the virus, would linger, but it was easy to imagine a much better world after the election, the inauguration and the wide availability of shots.

Now we're past all that, and American life is still comprehensively awful. Dystopia no longer has an expiration date.

Gerrymandering democracy

My friend Chris Hayes, the MSNBC host, uses the phrase 'the bad feeling' to describe certain kinds of stories about America's democratic

unraveling. ‘The bad feeling is that pit of the stomach feeling that we’re not OK, and it’s not clear we’re going to be OK,’ he told me.

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The problem isn’t just that polls show that, at least right now, voters want to hand over Congress to a party that largely treats the Jan. 6 insurrectionists as heroes. That’s upsetting, but it’s also fairly normal given the tendency of American voters to react against the party in power, and in a democratic system Republicans should prevail when they have public sentiment behind them.

What’s terrifying is that even if Democrats win back public confidence, they can win more votes than Republicans and still lose. Gerrymandering alone is enough to tip the balance in the House. North Carolina, a state Joe Biden lost by 1.3 percentage points, just passed a redistricting map that would create 10 Republican seats, three Democratic ones and one competitive one. ‘Democrats would have to win North Carolina by 11.4 points just to win half its congressional seats,’ FiveThirtyEight reported.

There are already lawsuits against the map, but the Supreme Court — which is controlled by conservatives even though Democrats won the popular vote in seven out of the last eight elections — gutted constitutional limitations on gerrymandering in 2019.

Things are, if anything, even worse in the Senate, where growing geographic polarisation threatens to give Republicans a near lock on the chamber. As my colleague Ezra Klein wrote last month, Democratic data guru David Shor predicts that if Democrats win 51 per cent of the two-party vote in 2024, they will lose seven seats compared to where we are now.

A Republican coup?

Meanwhile, Republicans are purging local officials who protected the integrity of the 2020 election, replacing them with apparatchiks. It will be hard for Republicans to steal the 2024 election outright, since they don’t control the current administration, but they can throw it into the sort of chaos that will cause widespread civil unrest. And if they win, it’s hard to imagine them ever consenting to the peaceful transfer of power again. As Hayes said, there’s an inexorability about what’s coming that is ‘very hard to watch.’

Given the bleak trajectory of American politics, I worry about progressives retreating into private life to preserve their sanity, a retreat that will only hasten democracy's decay.

Already, the Republican Party winks at the violent intimidation of its political enemies. During the presidential campaign, a right-wing caravan tried to run a Biden campaign bus off the road, and Sen. Marco Rubio cheered them on. School board members and public health offices have sought help from the Justice Department to deal with a barrage of threats and harassment. Three congressional Republicans have said they want to give an internship to teenage vigilante Kyle Rittenhouse. One of those Republicans, Rep. Paul Gosar, earlier tweeted an animated video of himself killing Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and the overwhelming majority of his caucus stood by him.

I look at the future and I see rule without recourse by people who either approve of terrorising liberals or welcome those who do. Such an outcome isn't inevitable; unforeseen events can reshape political coalitions. *Something* could happen to forestall the catastrophe bearing down on us. How much comfort you take from this depends on your disposition.

Given the bleak trajectory of American politics, I worry about progressives retreating into private life to preserve their sanity, a retreat that will only hasten democracy's decay. In order to get people to throw themselves into the fight to save this broken country, we need leaders who can convince them that they haven't already lost.

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